

I'M A GO-EEP

This morning I want to ask you a question therapists and councilors often ask their patients. “How does that make you feel?”

When you listen to this morning’s reading from Matthew’s Gospel, how does that make you feel?”

When you’re confronted by this dramatic scene from the final judgment, where Jesus the King is sitting on his heavenly throne determining the fate the people of every nation, how does that make you feel? Do you feel comforted? Disturbed? Encouraged? Dejected? Joyful? Sorrowful? Confused? All of the above?

If the Judgment Day is anything like Jesus described it here, I’m afraid I might cause him some trouble. It’s not that I want to be a troublemaker, mind you. It’s just that I don’t fit neatly into either one of the two categories our Lord describes.

When Jesus sits as King on his throne and says to me, “Make your case to me, Fred; are you a sheep or a goat?” I’ll struggle to come up with an honest answer. My response will most likely be something like, “Well, Lord, I did feed the hungry sometimes. There were days when I clothed the naked. And at various times I went and visited people who were in the hospital or imprisoned by the slings and arrows of life.” And Jesus will respond, “Very well, you were a good and decent sheep. Come here and stand on my right side.”

But then, before I move to the Lord’s right side, I’ll also have to say, “Lord, I need to be honest with you. There were other days, actually too many of them to count, when I stuffed myself with food while others went hungry. There were long winter nights when I slept in a warm, cozy bed with the furnace turned up to 68 degrees while others were shivering in a cold car or standing on an ice-glazed sidewalk with a worried look on their face. And I had enough money to live comfortably while there were people who asked me for some spare change to help them make ends meet, but I turned them away.”

Then the King will pause for a moment and say, “Hmmm. . . yes, I see. That behavior has the character of a goat. So now what am I going to do with you? Should I put you on my right side or my left side?”

Do you see the trouble I'm going to make for Jesus? Do you see the dilemma I'm going to put our Lord in? I'm not 100% sheep; but I'm not a full-blooded goat, either. What I really am, it seems, is a "go-eep." I'm part goat and part sheep. I'm not fit for either the king's right hand or his left hand.

On the one hand, the left hand, I have a selfish nature. I confess there have been many times in my life when I've lived by the personal code, "Look out for number one." Number one meaning, of course, me, myself, and I. I've been selfish enough at times that it surprises, and even disturbs me.

But on the other hand, the right hand, there were times when I have felt deep and genuine compassion for others who were hurting, and have given more of myself to those in need than I ever thought I was capable of giving.

Yeah, just call me a "go-eep." Part of me is a goat, and part of me is a sheep. Or, to use a more theological term, some of me is a saint and some of me is a sinner. I'm like a human jigsaw puzzle made up of various pieces, some of them self-centered and stingy, and others of them self-sacrificing and generous.

So, what in heaven's name is King Jesus going to do with someone like me on the Day of Judgment? Flip a coin: heads I win, tails I lose? Will he tell me I have to answer a question, call it an entrance exam, and if I get it correct I'm in, but if I mess up . . . well . . . let's not go there, okay?

Sometimes I think the outlook for my eternal destiny isn't all that promising. After all, when we have doubts about buying something, doesn't common sense tell us not to buy it? Let it go. Put it back on the shelf and walk away. Is that how the Lord will operate on the Day of Judgment, when those who are standing before him are part sheep and part goat? He has doubts, so he lets them go and walks away?

My hope is that when I'm standing before Christ, who holds the keys to eternal life in his hands, to give an account of my life, whatever doubts he has about me as a go-eep won't cause him to turn me away. Instead, I pray that when Jesus separates the sheep from the goats, mercy will be shown to me and God's grace will abound.

But just in case God isn't inclined to let things go, maybe there are some things that can be done to hedge our bets and increase our chances of being called a sheep rather than a goat.

I think one thing we can do to help ourselves is acknowledge that there's a right way and a wrong way to live as people of God. In other words, God has standards by which we're called to live. And let me say at this point, one important reason why we come to church is to remind ourselves what God's standards are, and receive continual strength and encouragement to abide by

those standards. Our hope is that if we can just get those standards figured out and planted firmly in our heads, then maybe we can face the Day of Judgment with relative confidence and calm.

By relative confidence and calm I mean being able to tell ourselves, “I have faith that my name is written in the Book of Life. I go to church. I don’t lie, cheat or steal. I don’t use profanity—well, not very much, at least. I pray, I read the Bible sometimes, and I believe in Jesus. I do this and I don’t do that. In other words, I’m trying to follow the standards God has set. I’m at least attempting to be one of the sheep.”

But in this parable of Jesus of the sheep and the goats, Jesus actually gives us the criteria that will be used to decide who’s a sheep and who’s a goat. It’s pretty clear criteria, but it may not exactly be the criteria we were expecting. Jesus tells us in this parable that we may well be shocked and dumbfounded on Judgment Day by the criteria the king is going to use for separating the sheep from the goats. And the criteria is simply this:

“I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you invited me in; I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me; I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

Both the sheep and the goats in Jesus’ parable are shocked and completely surprised by what the King tells them. And both of them respond in the very same way. “Lord, when did we ever see you in any of those circumstances?” Were you hiding behind a tree or wearing a disguise or something?”

Well, yes, in a way, Jesus was wearing a disguise. He was there incognito. Jesus was hiding behind the mask of the needy people all around them.

One interesting thing about this parable I want to hold up to you is how the sheep, the ones who cared for Christ by caring for others, didn’t recall doing any of these good and kind things. I got to wondering how that could be. How could the sheep not remember all the good deeds they had done?

The only answer I could think of was that the sheep acted in kindness and with compassion in a way that came naturally to them. They weren’t looking for credit or recognition for what they had done. They weren’t even concerned about earning merit for their salvation. No, when they saw a person in need, the love in their hearts simply caused them to respond. Almost without thought and without hesitation, they lent a helping hand whenever and wherever someone was in a situation that called for help. They were too busy loving and caring for the needy to notice Jesus’ presence in them.

Maybe one of the reasons they couldn’t remember seeing Jesus is that

the deeds they did for the people in need in whom Christ was hidden didn't seem to be that big a deal to them and weren't worthy of much if any attention. They weren't big deeds; they were just simple actions, like offering someone who's thirsty a drink of water, giving food items to the food pantry to feed the hungry, dropping a few coins or a dollar bill in a Salvation Army bucket to help those in need, or taking just a few minutes out of their busy lives to visit someone in the hospital. They did nothing earth-shattering, nothing that made the 6 o'clock news, nothing that brought heavenly visions or angel visitations. And none of the people they helped looked anything like Jesus.

So, in this parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus isn't demanding any extraordinary, totally unrealistic action. He's not asking us to give exorbitant gifts to the poor. He's not asking us to hand over the keys to our homes and all our possessions to the homeless.

Jesus isn't saying we all have to become chaplains at a hospital or the State Prison. The only thing our Lord is asking us to do, as the AT&T commercial years ago used to say, is "reach out and touch someone."

If you have ever been genuinely touched by the grace and love of God, then you probably know how it can create a "ripple" effect by generating other acts of grace and love. When we're touched by God's grace and love, it opens our eyes to the troubles and pain people experience and moves us to want to do something for them and help them. And as we respond to the needy people around us and make it a regular habit, it becomes clearer and clearer to us over time that those needy people have the divine spark of Christ within them. We come to realize that Jesus is genuinely present in them. Therefore, when we do something kind and caring for them, we're in effect doing it for Christ, too.

John Jackson, a Hunger Action Enabler in Orlando, Florida, described an event that occurred one day outside a food distribution center.

The line was long, but moving briskly. And in that line, at the very end, stood a young girl about twelve years of age. She waited patiently as those at the front of that very long line received a little rice, some canned goods, or a little fruit.

Slowly but surely she was getting closer to the front of that line. Closer to the food. From time to time she would glance across the street. She didn't notice the growing concern of those distributing the food because the food was running out. Their anxiety began to show, but she didn't notice. Her attention seemed always focused on three figures standing under the trees across the street.

At long last she stepped forward to get her food. But the only thing left was one lonely banana. The workers were almost ashamed to tell her that was

all that was left. But she didn't seem to mind. In fact, she seemed genuinely happy to get that single, solitary banana.

Quietly she took the precious gift and ran across the street where three small children waited. Probably her sisters and a brother. She very deliberately peeled the banana, and very carefully divided the banana into three equal parts. She then placed the precious food in the eager hands of those three younger ones—one for you, one for you, and one for you.

After she finished doing that, she sat down and licked the inside of that banana peel.

John Jackson wrote, "I swear, I saw the face of God."

What did John Jackson mean when he wrote, "I saw the face of God" in that child? I imagine he meant that the young girl's action mirrored what we know God is like as God was revealed in Jesus Christ. Like Christ, she gave every-thing so that others could be filled. And through her kindness and generosity, the face of God shined through her.

But I wonder if, in some mysterious way, that girl also saw the face of God in her three siblings. When they were hungry, she gave them something to eat. And when she did that for them, she did it for Christ, as well, whether she realized it or not.

One final thought. We're all very familiar with what has become known as *the Golden Rule* Jesus gave us. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." We could look at *the Golden Rule* as a promise of how God's judgment is going to be administered to us—the same divine judgment Jesus describes in the parable of the sheep and the goats.

And this is God's judgment: "We will be judged by the Lord in the same way and by the exact same standards as we judged others. Which is to me a strong encouragement to judge other people and treat them the way I want to be judged and treated by Christ when I stand before him: with kindness, generosity, compassion, mercy and love.

All of this may sound demanding, but actually Jesus isn't asking all that much of us. He only expects the kind of humble kindness and benevolence that's expressed by, for example, giving a banana to someone who is hungry; or a cup of water to a person who is thirsty; or a warm welcome to someone you don't know very well; or reaching out in compassion to someone who is ailing or is confined in a prison of mental illness, loneliness, depression or grief.

We won't do it perfectly, of course; but that's okay because God doesn't actually expect us to be perfect. God merely expects us to be faithful. And deep down, I trust that God has a divine plan in mind as to how God is going to judge those who will stand before Him on the Day of Judgment; and I believe divine grace and love will be central to that plan.

At least I pray it will be, because there are very few human beings who are 100% sheep or full-blooded goats. The vast majority of us are a mix, a combination of the two.

That makes all of us “Go-eeps;” and it’s only by God’s grace and love that any of us will be invited to stand at the King’s right hand. But thankfully, God’s mercy and grace are just what it takes for us Go-eeps to receive our inheritance and enter the heavenly realm God has prepared for us from the very beginning of the world.

But in the meantime, my fellow go-eeps, before we stand before the king to give an account of our lives here on earth, let’s go out and serve Christ in the poor, the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned and the needy we encounter every day. Amen.